

Karen's Travels to Costa Rica 2008

Day 1

After months of anticipation, I am finally headed to Costa Rica for a tour with Overseas Adventure Travel. After a late delayed from Miami, I arrive at San Jose late and exhausted, but excited. The crowd at the baggage carousel thins down to me and another person and there is one lonely bag going round and round. I stand there is a bit of disbelief for awhile. Crap. I've never had my luggage get lost before. The OAT representative finds me and helps me navigate the reporting process. Fortunately, I maxed out my backpack, so I realize I'm OK for at least the next couple of days. This is a trip of a lifetime, so I decide not to let it get me down and have faith my bag will reappear.

I get into a van for a very long trip and it is now late at night. I finally make it to my first hotel, La Condesa, which is a ways out from San Jose. The hotel is silent. It is a quaint place and in a big square and a courtyard that reminds me a bit of a castle. I finally get to a bed.

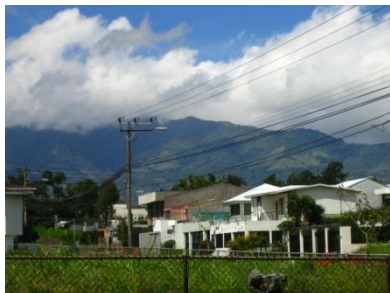
Day 2

I actually use the hotel toiletries and pack them to go. I even take a plastic bag in the trash barrels for my dirty laundry. It's survival mode. I make my way to breakfast where I forget about my bag for a bit. There's a fabulous buffet with fresh fruit and muffins. All problems are better with good food. I decide that I have to be a bit outgoing since I'm travelling alone. I sit with two nice ladies, but it turns out they are part of a different tour.

My group meets for the first time at an orientation. Am I in the right group? The tour was marketed as a high activity trip and this group looks very senior. I'm hoping 70 really is the new 40. There is another Karen in my group, so I use my little known nickname, Kaz, to avoid confusion. I'm relieved to see a couple that is close to my age. The group leader is a younger guy, Raphael. I couldn't be more wrong with my initial perceptions. It doesn't take me long to realize the age of the people on their tour has nothing to do with their ability to participate in the activities.

Raphael has no word on my bag. Everyone offers to lend me clothes and sunscreen. How nice.

We meet our bus driver, Walter. He doesn't speak English, but it's easy to tell he is very friendly. The bus is clean, comfortable, and has AC. Every time we stop to go on a tour, Walter gets out a bucket and scrub brush and goes to work. He must have the cleanest bus in Central America.



We start out on our first adventure to San Rafael. There is a farmers market. At first I'm apprehensive to leave the group because my past experiences in other countries are getting pressured by vulture-like vendors. Soon I realize that no one pays any extra attention to us. This isn't the tourist route and they aren't living off the tourist dollars. I venture more on my own. I like this.

After the market we take a bus tour of San Juan which includes going

by the president's house. It's in a nice neighborhood, but not stately and opulent like you would expect. We also learn some history including an interesting fact that Costa Rica hasn't had an army since 1949.



Our next trip is to a coffee plantation. After learning all about coffee and watching the workers, I understand the cost and I vow to never complain about the price of a cup of coffee again. I also learn more about fair trade coffee which basically means that as the price fluctuates, more of the profit goes back into the pockets of the people who do the actual labor. A lot of the workers here and other plantations are from Nicaragua. I learn there is a film, *A Day without a Nicaraguan* to parallel the film, *A Day without a Mexican*.



It starts to pour and I don't have any rain gear in my magic backpack. I go to the gift shop and they have a rain poncho. I fork over my \$5 for what looks like a lightweight trash bag with a hood. I have to say I got a lot of use out of that poncho and even when I got back to the states I kept it in my car to cover the seat after the gym and trips to the beach.

Lunch is a typical Costa Rican meal with rice and beans and we eat off banana leaves. I have pretty discerning tastes when it comes to food, so I am relieved that not only can I tolerate the food, I really like it. It's fresh and nicely prepared. I eat with two of the ladies on tour. They are very friendly.

After the tour we get in the bus and it cross the Continental Divide. It's a long trip and I am starting to get to know my 14 new friends. We stop at the San Fernando Waterfall. It's beautiful.

The next stop is a "soda" owned by Dona Elizabeth. A soda is a little eatery that gets started by a woman who cooks out of her home. Dona Elizabeth is doing well for herself. She has built a second floor for her soda. It's open-air and hanging on the edge are feeders for humming birds. She also has a tarantula named Rosita Juanita. We have some quesadillas and coffee.



We get to our lodging at Sarapiquí which is an eco lodge. The quarters are a cross between a hotel and a hut. The rooms are simple; no phone, no TV, and no AC. The ceilings are high thatched roofs. There is so much greenery and vibrant flowers. The pool in the middle of the grounds overlooks the rainforest.



I meet my group for some wine before dinner. Most people are retired teachers who live for travel. They tell me about a lot of the trips they have been on and how great it is to be retired. When I grow up I want to be retired.

I am starting to feel comfortable with everyone. I am also starting to feel some motherly love from these older ladies. I lost my mom not so long ago, so even though I'm 40-something, whenever someone offers me motherly attention, I grab it.

There's not a night scene at the lodge, but a glass of wine after dinner with my travel mates is nice.

Day 3

We venture out on a white water rafting trip. I have a swimsuit in my magic backpack. I'm not sure I'll like this. I went white water rafting once in Maine where we had to wear rented wet suits on a 90 degree day that turned me into a human sausage on the bus trip to the beginning of the river. This is much different. I have three hearty people in my raft so we can really paddle along. There are some hairy parts including a section called The Washing Machine, but no one falls out. We make a few stops along the way to see some nature and camouflage frogs. After the rafting we have lunch and I discover a bright green frog with bulging red eyes on one of the center pieces.



Our afternoon adventure is to go to a pineapple plantation. We learn how to pick the best pineapple. Pineapples are not like other fruit that continues to ripen after picked. It's best to look for one with a green, hard, and a healthy crown. Most people smell them and select the ones that smell sweet. However, that indicates the pineapple has been beaten up on route.



We ride in a tram and our guide, Danny, shares the history of pineapple production and how the business of pineapples has changed over time. Danny picks pineapples right from the field and quickly slices them with a machete that is quite impressive. The pieces are staggered and look like an arrangement you could set on your table. I can't get enough. At the end of the tour we sit on the patio for fresh pineapple drinks served in the pineapple shell.



On the way back to the lodge, the bus stops and Raphael pulls out a scope. There is a three-toed sloth in the tree.

That night back at the lodge, we meet Iki, a very nice young woman from the Maleku tribe that only has about 650 people left. She has handmade crafts and gives us a carving demonstration. She tells us about

how their tribe buries the dead in their houses and explains the rituals, including how they cleanse the body. Iki has a child and lives with her partner. In Cost Rica about 50% of coupled adults live together and 50% are married.



My luggage has been located. It went to Chicago. I'm relieved that I might see it again, but I'm doing OK with my magic backpack and realize how little I could get along with.

Day 4

Our next tour is La Tirimbina Bio Reserve. My only footwear is a pair of Teva sandals in my magic backpack, and open-toed shoes are not allowed. A guide finds some Welly boots, so I'm grateful I don't have to miss out. I love the hike and we go over a few hanging bridges. Some of the highlights are clear winged butterflies and Howler monkeys. I see new plants I have never seen before.

However, hiking in the hot rainforest with knee-high rubber boots with someone else's sweat mingling with my own is a bit uncomfortable. After the hike we see a presentation at the Museum of Indigenous Culture.



Our next trip is a long bus ride to Hotel Bosques de Chachagua, which abuts the International Children's Rainforest. We stop along the way at a little local market to pick up items for our happy hour later where we'll get a cooking lesson.

The ride was so long and in the middle of nowhere. This is my favorite lodging spot on the entire trip. I have my own free-standing cabin. The bathroom has huge windows where you can see out, but people cannot see in. There is a tree growing in the middle of the bathroom and I have a little porch.



The happy hour is great. We are in an outdoor covered kitchen in the middle of a thunderstorm. We learn how to cook cassava chips and make fresh salsa. The wine isn't bad either. We get a Spanish lesson in preparation for a visit to the school the next day and lunch hosted by a local family who doesn't speak English.



After dinner, my suitcase arrives. Walter, our bus driver, drops to his knees and bows to my bag. I'm sure his good humor will end the first time he has to pick it up and put it on the top of the bus. Everyone tells me what a good sport I was about the whole thing. As I am dragging my bag back to the cabin, there is a lot of nightlife; armadillos and other animals that was exciting, but a bit scary.

Day 5

We head out after breakfast to visit a school. On the way we stop at the house of Flori and her family. She is well-known in the area for making cheese. We all get to try our hand at milking her cows. I can't get it right. Her cows provide enough manure to supply gas for two houses on her property. We make tortillas and have coffee.



We arrive at the school and each of us is paired with a child. I'm paired with a girl whose name coincidentally is Karen. The children sing and dance wearing traditional dress that includes big colorful skirts for the girls. Then we get to put on skirts and join them. After we play games and I jump rope, something I haven't done in over 30 years.



After the school visit we have lunch with one of the children, Johan, and his mother, Lillian, at their home. She has grown sons and adopted Johan from Nicaragua. The lunch is great and we pool our Spanish skills to piece together enough Spanish to communicate. However, no words are needed to communicate feeling welcome. Our group has brought gifts. I give her a book about Boston and a guest book that we all sign and she can get signed when she has other groups. She is appreciative and we all hug her goodbye.



Back at the lodge, we hike up a bit up the hill to meet Rula, a mountain man who lives off the land and has an organic farm. We eat Rula's home grown bananas. They are like not anything I've bought at Shaw's. Rula is a true conservationist and he has made an interesting shower that uses water from the outdoors. Rula throws out the peels to some kind of animal I have never seen before. It looks like a kid's drawing and something I've never seen again.



Day 6

Today's tour begins at an organic farm owned by Don Juan Batista. Don Juan asks for a volunteer to pull out some cassava plants from the ground. I volunteer and it's a tough task, but I manage to do it. He is very impressed and says that many men have not been able to do it.

While touring the farm, I start feeling some discomfort on my feet. I realize my feet are covered with barely visible ants. Now they are biting. The group comes to my aid. For the record, bug spray doesn't do anything to get rid of ants and it also annoys the organic farm owner. What works best is a good dose of water to wash them away.

We meet a couple of cows on tour that will make you think twice the next time you eat a burger.



Other activities on the tour are rum making and learning about berries that can be used to make cosmetics. After the tour we have a fantastic lunch. All of the ingredients are from the farm except for the meat, which is fish.



After the farm we head to the town of La Fortuna. It's a beautiful town that abuts the Arenal Volcano. It's a lot less rustic than the other places we have been. It's a little touristy with several Americanized souvenir shops. We head up to our lodging which is more modern than the other places we have stayed with TVs and air conditioning. Most people are excited about this, but I found the other places more interesting. However, this place is on elevated land and the view is stunning.



That evening we tour of the hanging bridges. From one of the lookouts we see a lot of toucans that are look like the toucan on Froot Loop cereal boxes. The tour is amazing. The tour ends with a glass of wine on a beautiful deck looking at the sunset behind the volcano and then watching lava rocks rolling down the volcano.



Day 7

Today is Fourth of July. I start the morning with a jog up a trail alongside a volcano. It's very rocky and I have to be extra careful not to twist my ankle on the rocks. However, this trek triggers an old Achilles tendon injury that was OK for the rest of the trip, but leads to a lot of physical therapy when I get back to the States.

Our excursion for the day is to Los Chiles for a nature boat ride and a picnic at the Nicaragua border. Along the way we stop at an overpass along a river with lots of crocodiles. Sadly, some of them have ropes coming from their mouths. Some people taunt the alligators with chickens on a rope and when they let the crocs have the chicken, the rope goes with it. While we are there, someone throws a live chicken in a plastic bag and a croc devours it, bag and all. I found it quite disturbing.

Our picnic is very peaceful and a great way to spend the holiday. When we get back to the hotel, we spend the afternoon at the pool where I had a lot of fun on the water slides before a lovely group dinner.

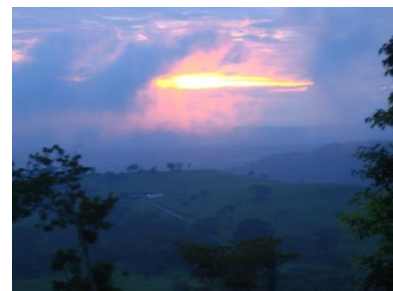
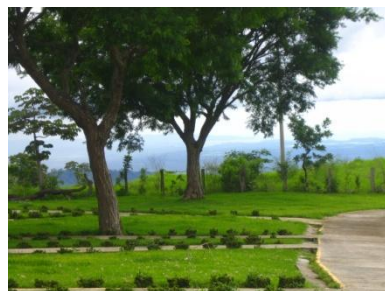


Day 8

We leave La Fortuna to head to Guanacaste. Along the way we stop to see some trees that are inhabited by hundreds of iguanas. Buena Vista looks a little bit like a dude ranch. We have the afternoon to explore and I head to the reptile house. I am very afraid of snakes and even just seeing them in aquariums makes my heart jump, especially when a Fur de Lance, a very poisonous snake, leaps at me and hits its head on the glass. I try to conquer my fear by allowing the keeper to put a boa constrictor around my neck.



In the afternoon we take an adventure hike that includes seeing some Strangler Fig Trees and a waterfall. In the evening we get together for a happy hour and to watch the sunset.



Day 9

Our first adventure today is a canopy zip line tour through the rainforest. While gearing up, a strange looking animal that looks like a cross between a pig and boar approaches us. It's a pickery. It looks kind of scary, but turns out to be quite affectionate. One of my tour mates, Marga, pets the pickery and it is

rubbing its fur along her leg. Marga discovers that the pickery has a potent, foul odor that is not only on her clothes, but on the company's zip line gloves. We have a good laugh about the surprise odor that awaits the next person who puts them on.



Our afternoon adventure is to the hot springs and mud baths, but to get there, we travel by horse. I'm a little afraid of horses, but managing. The path to the hot springs is narrow and steep and horses walking close together. When the trek starts, my horse starts oozing lots of mucus from its nose and it's disgusting. Everyone is trying to stay away from me so they don't get mucus on their legs and shoes.

I'm relieved to get to the hot springs where we cover ourselves in mud and put on some headdresses from nature for a pretty funny photo. It's so relaxing and I could stay here all day. When it's time to leave, I forgo the horseback return and take a truck ride back to the ranch.



Day 10

Today we move to the Pacific Coast to Monterey del Mar. On our way we meet Gustavo who makes pottery. The tools he uses have been passed down through his family for generations. Our hotel at Monterey is very nice and along the Jaco Beach. It's beautiful, but way too rough to swim in. Now I can see why Costa Rica is known for surfing.

This afternoon we travel by outrigger canoes to a small uninhabited island. Along the way I see pelicans flying along the islands and it reminds me of Jurassic Park. I find out later that Michael Creighton got the idea for Jurassic Park in Costa Rica when he saw a Jesus lizard running across the water. The island is beautiful and we take a small walk in to see an amazing waterfall.



Day 11

We head out to Manuel San Antonio State Park which begins with a nature walk where we see sloths, and Jesus lizards. In the middle of the Park we get to a beach where we have a swim and lunch. I spot an animal that looks like a cross between a raccoon and another animal that I can't place. It turns out to be a coatamundi. At the beach people gather around the trees because some white face Capuchin monkeys are putting on a little show. They are known to take people's bags and belongings if move away from them.

Day 12

Our morning adventure is another boat ride along the Rio Tarcoles where we search for crocodiles. At first people spot "trunkodiles" which are logs that at first glance make people think they are crocs. We see lots of birds such as osprey and egrets.



After the boat tour, we leave Monterey and head back to the capital, San Jose. We tour a wood factory, a Jewelry factory, and The National Theater for our last day before our farewell dinner for an incredible adventure filled with fantastic memories.



